

Meet Jesus: A person, not an institution

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[0 : 00] So we're on page 845, Mark's Gospel, chapter 9, and reading from verse 33. Mark chapter 9, from verse 33.

And they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, Were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent. For on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

And he sat down and called the twelve, and he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. And he took a child and put him in his midst, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me.

John said to him, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us. But Jesus said, Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink, because you belong to Christ, will by no means lose his reward.

[1 : 30] Friends, if you just look down at the text, look at the end of verse 33. Can you see three words there at the end of verse 33? On the way. On the way.

And then look also into verse 34. But they kept silent, for on the way. Do you see? So yes, they're travelling. Jesus and his disciples, they're on a journey.

And chapter 11, they arrive. Just look there at chapter 11, verse 1. Do you see over the page? Now when they drew near to where? Jerusalem. And verse 15.

Chapter 11, verse 15. And they came to Jerusalem. So where are we in Mark's Gospel? And we're in the second half of Mark's Gospel. And the disciples, well, they've worked out that their teacher is the Christ, the long-promised Messiah from the Old Testament, chapter 8, verse 29.

And on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus is not now teaching them about his identity, that is the Christ. He's not now teaching them that.

[2 : 36] Miracles, for example, are very few and far between on this road to Jerusalem. What Jesus is teaching his disciples is the reason he has come to planet Earth, which we know is to die on a cross.

And also the implications of that, what it would mean to follow Jesus, what sort of shape our life would have. In other words, to be a Christian, what it is to be a Christian.

That's the road here to Jerusalem. But to the average Jew, well, the Christ being executed, it's incomprehensible.

They just don't understand it. Even Jews today, they really can't believe it. They're just like their disciples here, you know, 2,000 years on and they're still in denial.

There's a synagogue in Glasgow, Garnet Hill. They've got their Old Testament scrolls. Well, it might not be scrolls, but they've got their Old Testament. They're related to Abraham, aren't they?

[3 : 41] But Jesus seems to have just slipped through their fingers. You know, he didn't sort of fit the bill. Isaiah said his form was marred beyond human likeness.

And the Jews think, well, it's just not what we wanted. Not what we wanted. So, these disciples are with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. And they've got in mind Jerusalem and a throne.

That's what's going through their thinking. But Jesus' destination is not to be seated upon a throne, but rather what? To be impaled, friends, isn't it?

Upon a cross. Do you see the difference? An absolute contrast, isn't there there? Absolute contrast. It's simply not what we want, says Peter to Jesus, chapter 8, verse 32.

In chapter 9, do you remember, last week, verse 31. It all sort of just washed over them. So, they're in denial, aren't they, these disciples? Just friends, just sort of try and put yourselves in their position.

[4 : 50] Try and imagine the first century shock, you know, when those words first hit their eardrums. Dying, a cross. All illustrations are imperfect, but think about this one.

Imagine there's something like a motor show. It's the unveiling of a new car. There's background music. Lighting. Special effects. The press are all there. Cameras firing away. There's a presenter speaking live on TV. The disciples are there in their kilts. Clean shaven. The aroma of aftershave.

Hair gel. They've got their stories rehearsed. You know, they've had three years, haven't they, of awesome miracles. Three years. We were his right hand men. We hear one of the disciples saying to the reporter, we hear a bottle of champagne going pop.

And then it's time, isn't it, for the silk sheet to be slowly pulled away. And the disciples are smiling, expecting a throne for their king. But as the sheet falls to the ground, all are aghast at the sight.

[6 : 03] The horror. It's a cross. And that's the sort of shock, friends, that they are encountering here. It's the way to Jerusalem. Yes, Jesus and the disciples, they're walking along the very same road, but they have two different destinations in mind.

A throne and a cross. And Mark's readers, you know, we can all look back in history, can't we? We have the benefit of hindsight and further revelation reaching us here.

But the disciples, well, they haven't got that. And so it's sort of, just the mention of the Christ, it's like it's ignited a Jewish nationalistic fervour.

And they're sort of lining themselves up, these disciples, for the status they think that they deserve. You know, they're on the crest of a wave, riding it into Jerusalem.

And this passage, friends, is about our imaginations of grandeur. Our imaginations of grandeur. It's about how, listen, they're in absolute conflict to being a follower of Jesus.

[7 : 17] And we all think, don't we? We all think, well, that's not me. And in thinking that, Mark's quarter is red-handed. Listen to this. J.C. Ryle says that the Holy Spirit inspired this account for the perpetual use of his church.

Let us take care that it is not written in vain. So they're on this journey towards Jerusalem. The excitement's rising.

It's like, it must be something like getting ready for a wedding. Or it's with you, you've got all your baggage and you're at the airport, full of anticipation, going on holiday somewhere.

You know, the excitement's rising as they're on this journey. And there's a certain something, isn't there, that words struggle to capture when you're waiting for something like that exciting to happen. It's put a spring in their toes and words onto their lips. I think Peter's the greatest, says one of them. Oh, no, no, not Peter. He keeps putting his foot in it.

[8 : 21] Must be John then. That's the sort of conversation they have. It all seems quite innocent, doesn't it, as they walk along. And Jesus is walking ahead, out of earshot.

And on this day, they're following his footprints, but not his words. You know, they'd hardly dare speak to him after that daft talk about death.

And so does that distance, friends. And it's almost like they're giving Jesus the cold shoulder, you see. They're ignoring him as he walks on, by himself, alone.

And think about this. It's a visual image, friends, of our sin, isn't it? He comes to walk with us. But what do we do? We ignore him, don't we? Do our own thing.

There's that distance. Like boats that have come detached from their moorings, drifting away from the Lord and Saviour.

[9 : 21] That's what sin is. As a child, did you ever come home from school, and the moment you saw your mum, you knew that you were in for it?

Has that ever happened to you? You know, that first moment when you see her, they enter this house, and Jesus was waiting for them, wasn't he? What were you discussing on the way?

They thought that he was out of earshot, but he wasn't. What were you discussing on the way, he says to them, verse 33, and you could hear a pin drop. Silence speaks volumes, doesn't it, friends?

Rabbis, well, they usually sat down to teach, and Jesus walks away and sits down, doesn't he?

He could have been wearing a wig. They could have been in the witness box. The feelings would have been the same. Verse 35, he calls the twelve. They thought it was just one ticking off, but it

became two when John opened his mouth.

[10:24] Just look there at verse 38. Have a look at 38. John said to him, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.

So they're tumbling, aren't they, from one confusion into another. It's like the thought of Jesus' execution. It's made them punch drunk or something.

They're sort of reverting to the religion of their own imagination. And Jesus addresses these two blunders. We've got two points. The first point is Jesus reverses the pecking order.

And that's from verse 34. Have a look down there. But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

And he sat down and called the twelve, and he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be what? Last of all, and servant of all.

[11:26] Think about this. Their expectation, wasn't it? It was worldly status. And it was derived, it was derived from their expectation of Jesus' status in the world.

You know, an eternal kingdom, they thought, to Samuel chapter 7. And this son of man figure, you know, victorious, Daniel chapter 7.

But there's no cross in their thinking. Are you with me? It's like they've done a smash and grab raid from the Old Testament, and they're trying to snatch out of it what they want, do you see?

And so, Jesus reintroduces them to his kingdom, not their kingdom, if anyone would be first, he says, he must be last of all, and servant of all.

Rattles our cages, doesn't it? The Adam in us doesn't like it. Turns the table, doesn't it, friends, on worldly thinking? Think about this, you know, we're brainwashed to sort of think that a person's status is derived from their job, or their wealth, or their abilities.

[12:41] Last week, it was the VIP lounge, wasn't it, for Donald Trump. Or, it's something like the cult of celebrity. Or, says Jesus, it's the Pharisees on their street corners.

They're operating in the same way. But just think, friends, about the logic here. Think about the logic. The world thinks that our status is added to a person.

Sort of like putting money into the bank. Something like that. And so, you know, if you go and make a mistake, you could lose the lot.

Couldn't you? It's why, as a society, we're so anxious all the time. Do you see? We're trying to earn acceptance. But, says the Bible, status is something that we can't earn.

Listen to this. It is us. It is us. We're made in God's image, friends, aren't we? So, we all, each one of us, have an innate dignity about us.

[13:46] All of us. And so, friends, the young guy on Renfield Street, begging with his polystyrene cup, he's suddenly got dignity, hasn't he?

He's suddenly bearing God's image. God has invested his image in him, the addict. And so, friends, we're not superior to that addict.

Think about this. It suddenly gives the frail, elderly, old man somewhere, you know, he can't even hold a cup to his mouth to have a cup of tea.

He's incontinent. Suddenly, he's got dignity, hasn't he? He's got the dignity that the world has tried to snatch from him. An unborn child suddenly has greater value than the convenience of its parents. And Jesus wants us to judge, not by appearances, but by his revelation to us. He's telling us how it is. But the world reveals to its old ways, doesn't it?

[14:52] The disciples argue, don't they, about who is the greatest. The chief priest around Jesus when he's on the cross mocking him, come down from there. But the first are the last, says Jesus.

Paul says, though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing.

Taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

So, friends, think about this. What's the application for ourselves? When did you last deliberately avoid speaking to somebody?

You know, because they didn't really seem much to you. You deliberately walked from them. Yes, it's counterintuitive, friends, isn't it?

[15:54] But then so is the cross, and so is Jesus. How do we know, friends, whether we've understood this or not? Let's have a look. Verse 36.

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me.

So, here's a child. Doesn't look very important, does he? A child, especially in the first century world, can't advance your career. The child can't enhance your prestige, but the first, our last, says Jesus, receive such as these, and you receive me.

It's all topsy-turvy, isn't it, friends? It all seems topsy-turvy, but it's our world that's got it wrong. It's the world that's got it wrong, friends, a world in which Adam tries to be God.

God, and here's Jesus, the first is indeed the last. And he wants us, friends, doesn't he, his people to embody the same.

[17 : 15] Do you remember the national outpouring over the death of Diana? Can you remember that the outpouring of grief, there was acres of flowers?

Do you remember it all? candles burning everywhere, miles of queues. You know, their funeral entourage as it drove to Althorp House, people were sort of devoting themselves in acts of worship to it as it sort of drove past.

But Jesus has a borrowed tomb, doesn't he? And his wounds, his wounds were the parting tributes of this world, the first. was indeed last.

Graham Kendrick wrote a song about this very irony. He wrote it just after the death of Diana. I'll just read a couple of verses.

No scenes of stately majesty for the king of kings. No nights aglow with candle flame for the king of love. No flags of empire hung in shame for Calvary.

[18 : 24] No flowers perfumed the lonely way that led to a borrowed tomb for Easter day. No wreaths upon the ground were laid for the king of kings.

Only a crown of thorns remained where he gave his love. A message scrawled in irony, King of the Jews lay trampled where they turned away. And no one knew that it was the first Easter day.

And Jesus is confronting us this lunchtime and he's showing us friends himself isn't he? The first is last and he wants us to live lives the same.

Our second point is Jesus abolishes the closed shop and that's from verse 38. You remember John's outburst teacher we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.

You know in the mind of John he's part of a new religious sect it's a new uprising and he wants to sort of protect its purity doesn't he? Do you see?

[19 : 32] And so he's like ring fencing Christianity. He's got it all sorted out. He's saying we saw him Jesus he was casting out demons in your name. So he told him Jesus that he'd got it wrong.

He should be doing things for us. We don't want people going off everywhere doing things for you Jesus. that's the content of what he's said and it's the institutional church isn't it?

It's the year 1521 and Martin Luther is before the Roman Catholic Church on a charge of faith in Jesus only trusting Jesus only.

You know abandoning the us of the Roman institution and the supplementary doctrines around the gospel. As humans we like institutions don't we?

You know we like to be on the inside. Am I right? You know special privileges knowing certain people. This building is very interesting in that respect. If you go downstairs after the service look at some of the doors downstairs they've got little shutters on them because this building here used to belong to the Freemasons and there used to be a knock on the door and the shutter would slide open and two eyes would appear and they'd see who wanted in.

[20 : 54] Those on the inside those on the outside secret rooms mysticism but Abraham well he knew the gospel would go out unhindered to all nations didn't he?

all nationalities not just confined to the Jews and so the church's unity is what? Not the institution but Jesus do you see?

Are you with me? We're held together not by the institution but a relationship isn't that good news? A relationship otherwise we'd all end up trusting the institution wouldn't we?

Rather than the saviour do you see? And if we trusted the institution we'd lose our certainty of salvation lose our assurance how do we know friends if a person's understood this and verse 41 is the test for truly I say to you whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward it's a welcome isn't it?

A brother or a sister welcomes you and the bond between you is Jesus I was upset recently when a church almost snatched away a friend of mine they took him away to their own church their own service and they ended up eclipsing my friend's faith in Jesus by what?

[22 : 25] The mode of baptism and my friend came back with no assurance of his salvation like they'd pulled the rug from beneath his feet in Christ alone my hope is found shall we pray?

Dear Heavenly Father we ask that you protect us from the beguiling power of our egos give us the strength and the clarity of mind to live a cross shaped life and help us to serve others Father especially those that we might otherwise try to avoid in some way give us Father your son as our example so that he animates our thinking and motivates our actions and we pray Father you'd be with us now and go with us into our various situations and to that end may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now this day and forever more Amen